

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000626

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL MARR IZ KU

SUBJECT: (C) GOK SAYS ARAB LEAGUE MINISTERIAL WAS TOUGH ON SADDAM

Classified By: (U) AMBASSADOR RICHARD H. JONES; REASON: 1.5 (B,D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: MFA MinState Dr. Mohammed al-Sabah told Ambassador February 19 that the February 15-16 Arab League Ministerial in Cairo was very tough on Iraq and will not have given any comfort to Saddam. The Saudi FM in particular stated forcefully that the Europeans and Americans really had the same goal, regime change in Iraq, and the quicker American approach was arguably kinder. Dr. Mohammed asserted that the Ministers did not agree to any statement, nor to an extraordinary summit as called for by Egypt: as of March 1, Bahrain will take over as chairman of the Arab League; an extraordinary summit before then would be chaired by Lebanon, which performed unacceptably in Cairo, under Syrian pressure.

The alleged communique published by Lebanon after the meeting had not even been discussed, because of widespread opposition to issuing any statement at all. The Ambassador stressed Washington's strong commitment to action on Iraq.

END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) The Ambassador met February 19 with Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. DCM sat in along with PolChief (Notetaker); Dr. Mohammed was accompanied by his Office Director Shaykh Dr. Ahmed Nasser Mohammed al-Sabah, Amb. Khaled al-Babtain, Director of the Americas Department, and Babtain's Deputy Ayham al-Omar.

¶13. (C) Iraq virtually monopolized the discussion (other topics septels). The Ambassador reported that the message he came away with from the NEA Chiefs of Mission Conference earlier this month was that the USG is fully committed to action on Iraq, preferably with a second UNSCR, but without one if necessary.

¶14. (C) Dr. Mohammed asked about the USG's view of the position of various countries in the region. The Ambassador stressed our appreciation for the support of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, the GCC as a whole with its Peninsula Shield Force, and King Abdullah of Jordan. (He said we appreciate that Turkey is moving forward, but are frustrated at its slow pace.) At the other end of the spectrum was Syria, where we continued to receive credible troubling reports of operational support for Iraq -- though this has not affected our cooperation against al-Qaeda terrorism. In response to another question, he added that we appear to have reached an understanding with Egypt, which continues to provide access to the Suez canal, a very real contribution to our preparations for Iraq contingencies.

¶15. (C) Dr. Mohammed raised France and Germany, noting that he had received the French ambassador during the Eid holidays and told him the absence of a timeline renders unacceptable France's proposal for strengthening inspections: "Saddam has been in material breach for twelve years." Responding to Dr. Mohammed's concern about a possible French veto of a second UNSCR, the Ambassador recalled the Kosovo precedent, in which NATO took military action despite a threatened Russian veto, but still obtained a UNSCR for managing matters after the fighting ended. The Ambassador shared his impression that Washington wanted to make a strategic decision on how to proceed before the end of February -- without necessarily acting on it right away.

(U) ARAB LEAGUE MINISTERIAL

¶16. (C) Turning to the February 15-16 Arab League Ministerial in Cairo chaired by Lebanon, Dr. Mohammed (who represented Kuwait at the event), said there was a long closed meeting (i.e. Ministers only) at which speaker after speaker told Iraq there is no way to avoid war short of total cooperation. Saudi FM Prince Saud al-Faisal, briefing on his recent meetings with Presidents Bush and Chirac, stated that both the European and American approaches lead to the same result: regime change in Iraq. The US approach would chop off the head, while the European approach would strangle the body until it collapsed. Perhaps the quicker option would be more merciful. Prince Saud had no doubt the US was determined to go to war. Recognizing this, he had advised the U.S. not to target administrative and security (i.e. police) installations, which would be needed to hold the country together and prevent a bloodbath of revenge killings. The

slim chance of averting war is 100% compliance on four issues: missiles, VX, anthrax, and scientists.

¶7. (C) Iraqi FM Naji Sabri responded not with a defense of Saddam and his regime but with numerous references to the Baath party's closeness to the people -- an obvious pitch to Syria, per Dr. Mohammed. Sabri reiterated Baghdad's standard claim that Iraq unilaterally destroyed its WMD and documentary proof of the destruction. He drew derisive laughter when he said "we threw it (the VX) into the river." For the next four and a half hours, one Minister after another told Sabri there is no way out except 100% compliance, and Iraq needs to prove its peaceful intentions to its neighbors, Kuwait but also others including Iran. He was told that Saddam's December 7 speech, allegedly an apology to Kuwait, had harmed his own cause.

¶8. (C) Syrian FM Sharaa was "odd man out", claiming Iraq was already cooperating fully; he opposed Egypt's call for an extraordinary Arab League summit on grounds that if it was to put pressure on Iraq, it was "US inspired" and thus unacceptable. Lebanon chaired the meeting but did not speak.

(C) STATEMENT DEBACLE

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¶9. (C) Dr. Mohammed said Kuwait considers the statement issued by Lebanon after the meeting to be a "forgery." Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, Yemen, and the Palestinians supported issuing a statement, and a draft was circulated half an hour before the meeting broke up, but it was never discussed because of widespread opposition to issuing any statement. Egypt moved for a vote on the concept of whether to issue any statement at all, Saudi Arabia seconded, and Algeria did likewise on behalf of the Maghreb. Rather than calling for a vote, the chair ended the meeting, then went out and gave the statement to the press, saying the Ministers had agreed to it.

(C) EMERGENCY SUMMIT?

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¶10. (C) Regarding Egypt's call for an extraordinary Arab League summit, Dr. Mohammed said Kuwait is not keen on the idea even though "we trust Mubarak." However, in light of Lebanon's performance in Cairo, he said there is widespread opposition to letting it chair a summit, especially given that Bahrain will assume the chairmanship as of March 1. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the GCC states and the Maghreb countries all oppose the idea of an extraordinary summit, he said, though for varying reasons. He thought only three countries had responded favorably to Egypt's call: Oman, Djibouti and Somalia.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Dr. Mohammed seemed confident that, despite the negative press play, the substance of the discussion in Cairo Ministerial was positive for Kuwait, and "cannot have reassured Saddam."

JONES